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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Again, this week, I find myself running out of time. So, as I stated last week, I'll just move right ahead and let you get right to this week's issue!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Major March Update for Xbox One Begins Rolling Out
Did Atari Invent Interaction Design?
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Major March Update for Xbox One Begins Rolling Out

Gamers, start your engines. Just weeks after the console s first major update was pushed out, Microsoft has announced that the Xbox One s March update began rolling out to consoles on Tuesday night. The big new software update comes one week ahead of Titanfall s release on March 11th, and it includes plenty of new functionality as well as some big bug fixes.

Here are details on the key additions, from Microsoft s blog post:

Get to your friends list faster. The friends list is now front and center on the homepage of the Friends app. Click the Social tile on Home,

or say Xbox, go to Friends to see who s online and what they re up to. From there you can quickly send messages and get into a party.

Party chat on by default. When you party up, chat audio is turned on by default.

Chat with friends playing different games. Party chat is now separated from people playing your game, so you can chat with your friends who are online or you can chat with everyone playing the game.

Invite friends to game option available in your multiplayer titles. Similar to Xbox 360 titles, when you re inside a game s menu you have a simpler and quicker way to set up your multiplayer battles. Selecting Invite friends lets you invite friends to your game and party.

See a list of Recent Players. This is a simple list that shows you Xbox Live members you ve recently played with, making it easier to stay in touch with people, add new friends after your multiplayer sessions, or report a player for bad behavior.

Twitch live streaming support. The best broadcasting and spectating experience on any game console is on its way to Xbox One with the new Twitch app launching on March 11, just say Xbox broadcast to start sharing. Xbox One is the only next-gen console that allows you to archive your Twitch broadcasts and view live Twitch streams regardless of their original source.

Dolby Digital sound. Optical out now supports 5.1 Dolby Digital, enabling devices such as sound bars and headsets with only optical in to be able to receive 5.1 Dolby Digital from Xbox One over optical. We re also adding support for Dolby Digital surround sound over HDMI. Now you ll be able to have the best sound quality no matter what speaker setup you are using.

We will now support 50Hz output to Xbox One. You can set the live TV app to display at 50Hz for full or fill modes, fixing the frame rate issues some users in Europe have been experiencing while watching live TV on Xbox One.

Volume up/down adjustments. We re making it easier to adjust the volume on your Xbox One. Now, you can tailor the number of volume increments when using Xbox volume up or Xbox volume down voice commands.

New ways to stay connected with SmartGlass. We re introducing new ways for you to stay connected with your friends through Xbox One SmartGlass. Receive notifications of Xbox Live messages, check out what your friends are doing, and see their latest highlight clips. You can even unsnap apps with the tap of a finger   all from your personal device.

Support for new Xbox One accessories. Xbox One now supports the recently announced Xbox One Stereo Headset and Adapter, the Xbox One Media Remote with a dedicated OneGuide button, as well as third party headsets.

Browser improvements. When you re searching for content, there s now a direct link to IE to see related results on the web. New gesture and controller features let you directly zoom and pan Bing and Google maps. And search is even faster in IE   just highlight a phrase on a web page and press the menu button to search Bing and learn more.

IR blasting of power and volume to TVs/AVRs is now available in all regions.

Easy sound bar setup. Your audio sound bar set up just got a lot easier. You no longer need to type in the model number for most sound bars or AVRs when setting up TV on Xbox One.

General improvements. Last, but not least, a few miscellaneous updates like the ability to view Game Clips while in Snap mode and a new passkey feature to protect user settings.

The update has already begun hitting Xbox One consoles and it will

continue to roll out throughout the week.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Did Atari Invent Interaction Design?

Avoid missing ball for high score. With those six words, Atari launched an industry in the early 1970s. The words were the complete instructions for Pong. Their brevity perfectly embodied Pong s simplicity, and simplicity was the basis of Pong s colossal success.

It was by design. Prior to launching Atari with the 1972 debut of Pong, Nolan Bushnell labored over another video game called Computer Space, which was (by the standards of the era) phenomenally complex: The player controlled a rocket with a set of push buttons, steering, accelerating, and shooting at hovering flying saucers. People were baffled, unable to master the interface, let alone grasp the simulated physics of a spaceship in zero gravity. So when Bushnell started Atari, he instructed his engineer Allan Alcorn to make a game that any drunk in any bar can play.

You won t find Computer Space in the Museum of Modern Art s design collection. But you will see Pong, which is currently included in a new exhibit called A Collection of Ideas. Together with such classics as Asteroids, Space Invaders and Tetris, Pong exemplifies interaction design according to the curators. Though they don t elaborate on the reasons, they re absolutely right.

Pong was not only attuned to the technology of the 70s, but also tailored to the prospective audience for an essentially unprecedented medium. Deriving the game from table tennis, Bushnell and Alcorn made the concept so basic that anyone could instantly understand, yet they added enough nuance such as the way paddle position effects deflection angle of the ball that people would keep playing and playing. And though players couldn t have expected it, experience with Pong prepared them for the less familiar territory of Asteroids and Space Invaders. (Even Computer Space might have succeeded if it had come out several years later.)

Interaction design is now an industry › and also a university degree yet no recent product has surpassed what Pong achieved in terms of reaching people and extending them beyond their prior limits. The iconic black-and-white screen may now inspire nostalgia. Instead it should serve as an open challenge.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Another Bitcoin Bank Shuts Down After Hacking Theft

Flexcoin, a Canada-based Bitcoin bank, said it was closing down after losing bitcoins worth about $600,000 to a hacker attack enabled by flaws in its software code.

Flexcoin said in a message on its website that all 896 bitcoins stored online were stolen Sunday. Its collapse came after Mt. Gox, once the world s dominant bitcoin exchange, filed for bankruptcy protection in Japan and said it may have lost some 850,000 bitcoins due to hacking.

As Flexcoin does not have the resources, assets or otherwise to come back from this loss, we are closing our doors immediately, Flexcoin said.

It later posted an update on its site saying that the attack exploited a flaw in its code on transfers between users and involved inundating the system with simultaneous requests to move coins between accounts.

Flexcoin has made every attempt to keep our servers as secure as possible, including regular testing, it said, adding that it had repelled thousands of attacks over the past few years. But in the end, this was simply not enough.

The Alberta, Canada-based firm, which said it s working with law enforcement agencies to trace the source of the hack, said it would return bitcoins stored offline, or in cold storage, to users.

Cold storage coins are held in computers not connected to the Internet and therefore cannot be hacked.

Flexcoin said on Feb. 25 it was not affected by Mt. Gox s closure. While the Mt. Gox closure is unfortunate, we at Flexcoin have not lost anything, it tweeted then.

Bitcoin is a digital currency that, unlike conventional money, is bought and sold on a peer-to-peer network independent of central control. Its value soared last year, and the total worth of bitcoins minted is now about $7 billion.

According to Bitstamp, one of the largest exchanges for trading bitcoins, one bitcoin was valued at about $658 on Wednesday.

DDoS Cyber Attacks Get Bigger, Smarter, More Damaging

Crashing websites and overwhelming data centers, a new generation of cyber attacks is costing millions and straining the structure of the Internet.

While some attackers are diehard activists, criminal gangs or nation states looking for a covert way to hit enemies, others are just teenage hackers looking for kicks.

Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks have always been among the most common on the Internet, using hijacked and virus-infected computers to target websites until they can no longer cope with the scale of data requested, but recent weeks have seen a string of particularly serious attacks.

On February 10, internet security firm Cloudflare says it protected one of its customers from what might be the largest DDoS documented so far.

At its height, the near 400 gigabyte per second (gbps) assault was about 30 percent larger than the largest attack documented in 2013, an attempt to knock down antispam website Spamhaus, which is also protected by Cloudflare.

The following day, a DDoS attack on virtual currency Bitcoin briefly took down its ability to process payments.

On February 20, Internet registration firm Namecheap said it was temporarily overwhelmed by a simultaneous attack on 300 of the websites it registers, and bit.ly, which creates shortened addresses for websites like Twitter, says it was also knocked out briefly in February.

In a dramatic case of extortion, social networking site Meetup.com said on Monday it was fighting a sustained battle against hackers who brought down the site for several days and were demanding $300 to stop. It would not pay, Meetup CEO Scott Heiferman told Reuters.

DDoS attacks were at the heart of attacks blamed on Russian hackers against Estonia in 2007 and Georgia during its brief war with Russia in 2008. It is unclear if they played a role in the current stand-off between Moscow and Ukraine in which communications were disrupted and at least one major government website knocked out for up to 72 hours.

A report this month by security firm Prolexic said attacks were up 32 percent in 2013, and a December study by the cyber-security-focused Ponemon Institute showed them now responsible for 18 percent of outages at U.S.-based data centers from just 2 percent in 2010.

The average cost of a single outage was $630,000, it said.

"It’s really a game of cat and mouse," said Jag Bains, chief technology officer of Seattle-based DOSarrest, a firm that helps government and private-sector clients protect their sites.

"I’d like to say we are ahead, but I just don’t think it’s true."

As well as growing in volume, he said attacks were becoming much more sophisticated in targeting the most vulnerable parts of websites, making even a small attack much more effective.

The aims of attackers include extortion, political activism, providing distraction from data theft and, for "hobbyist" hackers, just testing and showcasing their skills, security experts say.

Other victims in recent months have included the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Royal Bank of Scotland and several major U.S. banks, which

analysts believe were targeted by Iran in response to sanctions. Iran denies the charge.

Many attacks, however, appear to be homegrown. The most popular point of origin for DDoS attacks in the last three months of 2013, Prolexic said, appeared to be the United States, followed by China, Thailand, Britain and South Korea.

As well as hijacking computers, Prolexic said attackers are increasingly targeting smartphones, particularly those using Google's Android operating system, which by the third quarter of 2013 accounted for more than 80 percent of new phones.

Even wireless printers, experts say, have sometimes been co-opted into attacks, packed together in botnet groups. That, they warn, can put previously unprecedented cyber firepower in the hands of relatively unskilled hackers, who increasingly include teenagers.

Last year, British police arrested a 16-year-old as part of their investigations into the attack on Spamhaus, while German police arrested an 18-year-old after a DDoS attack paralyzed the Saxony government website.

DDoSarrest says some of the most recent attacks it has dealt with were on U.S. universities and largely blamed on students showing off or protesting against high tuition fees.

The sheer volume of attacks means many perpetrators are never traced, and some computer security experts complain law-enforcement authorities remain reluctant to prosecute the youngest offenders.

Until recently, DDoS attacks were seen less of a threat than attempts to steal customer data or intellectual property. That, however, is changing fast.

Last year's Spamhaus attack was described by some as slowing the entire global Internet, and most experts agree the largest attacks can slow access across entire regions. Cloudflare says there were anecdotal reports of slowness in Europe during the latest attack.

Crashing data centers can wreak havoc with other services based there, including phone systems and vital industrial facilities.

The Ponemon report showed DDoS attacks are now the third largest cause of outages after power system failure and human error, outstripping traditional causes such as weather events.

Even if attacks do not succeed, the cost of mitigating them is rising fast, providing many millions of dollars of business for firms such as Cloudflare and Prolexic, taken over last month by Akamai Technologies for about $370 million.

Namecheap, which aims to offer cut-price hosting for websites, said it had already spread its data centers across five countries and three continents to better handle constant attacks but was still overwhelmed by the roughly 100 Gbps incident.

Attacks on that scale, Prolexic says, now occur several times a month and are now frequently so complex and fast moving that automated systems can no longer tackle them.

Prolexic itself runs a permanently manned operation centre at its headquarters in Florida, allowing it to keep one step ahead and instantly move material between data centers.

"It’s very hard to know what to do," said Alexander Klimburg, a cyber security expert at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs currently on exchange at Harvard Kennedy School of Government. "The tools to do this can be purchased online incredibly cheaply, while the damage they can do and the cost of mitigating it is exponentially higher."

New WiFi Worm Can Spread Like an Airborne Disease

This malware is sick: The experimental Chameleon malware spreads rapidly among WiFi networks in densely populated areas, much as a disease spreads through crowded urban areas.

Developed in a laboratory at the University of Liverpool in England, Chameleon is the first malware known to propagate by hopping from one WiFi network to another.

It was assumed that it wasn t possible to develop a virus that could attack WiFi networks; but we demonstrated that this is possible and that it can spread quickly, Alan Marshall, one of the paper s co-authors, said in a statement.

Chameleon is technically a worm, not a virus, because it replicates without human assistance by trying to crack the password of each new WiFi router it encounters. Chameleon nevertheless behaves like a biological infectious organism, jumping among overlapping WiFi networks much as an airborne disease spreads among humans.

The researchers simulated Chameleon infections in London and Belfast and found that just a few infections can spread the worm to thousands of infected devices within 24 hours.

Furthermore, because Chameleon doesn t migrate beyond WiFi routers, it is undetectable to current antivirus software, which scans for threats on computers and the Internet.

In its current state, Chameleon doesn t do much more than replicate itself and identify poorly protected WiFi networks, but the researchers say in their paper that such malware could be used to eavesdrop on Internet traffic, alter or destroy data packets, or destroy an infected WiFi router.

Chameleon doesn t exist in the wild, so there s no real risk of infection. The good news is that a strong WiFi password will keep your router safe from this kind of malware; if it can t break into your router, it will simply move on to the next available one.

The bad news is that many commercial and private WiFi networks have weak passwords or simply aren t password-protected at all.

In that sense, a WiFi password is like a vaccine; having it will protect not only you, but the people or WiFi routers around you as well.

Privacy Advocates Want To Halt Facebook Acquisition of WhatsApp

The appeal of WhatsApp, the cross-platform mobile messaging app recently acquired by Facebook for a stunning $19 billion price tag, was that it kept to its promise of not collecting user information that would be converted to ad revenue.

The acquisition by Facebook, however, likely changes that dynamic, and that worries consumer privacy advocates. Two such groups filed a complaint this week with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission requesting an investigation and possibly an injunction temporarily blocking the acquisition.

The Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) and the Center for Digital Democracy (CDD) filed the complaint recently, stepping up on behalf of WhatsApp s hundreds of millions of active users. The complaint said Facebook has made it clear it will incorporate WhatsApp user data into its business model, and that s something users didn t sign up for.

The proposed acquisition will therefore violate WhatsApp users understanding of their exposure to online advertising and constitutes an unfair and deceptive trade practice, the complaint said.

Reportedly, 50 billion messages are shared daily between WhatsApp users worldwide. WhatsApp said it collects only mobile phone numbers from its users and any other association of personal information with that number happens on the device and is not stored by WhatsApp, its privacy policy states. The service doesn t store or copy message content either, it said.

The concern is that Facebook will be able to construct complete profiles on WhatsApp users, most of whom are likely already among Facebook s 1.2 billion subscribers. WhatsApp users who regard the privacy promises made by the app could not be subject to intrusive targeted advertising which is the heart of Facebook s revenue model. Facebook, meanwhile, has established precedent with past acquisitions, including Instagram in 2012, where it changes existing privacy policies and terms of service to indeed collect user data.

In backing up its claims of deceptive trade practices, EPIC and the CDD point out that WhatsApp users expect a privacy-protective messaging service and could not have anticipated their data would be subject to Facebook s data collection and mining practices, the complaint said.

EPIC formally asked the FTC to investigate the acquisition on these grounds, in particular concerning Facebook s ability and intent to access WhatsApp users mobile phone numbers and metadata. It also asked that until the investigation is completed that the acquisition be halted.

In the event that the acquisition proceeds, order Facebook to insulate WhatsApp users information from access by Facebook s data collection practices, the complaint said.

According to Reuters, Facebook said in a statement that WhatsApp will operate as a separate company and will honor its privacy and security commitments.

Oops! Twitter Accidentally Resets Many User Passwords

Late Monday night, Twitter mistakenly reset a whole lot of its members passwords, sending notification emails to each member s email address and triggering a lot of panic about a service-wide hacking.

Just got notified by Twitter that my password has been reset, the technology journalist Paul Kedrosky tweeted last night. Has there been a hack? No way the issue is at my end.

Not to worry, Paul! According to the technology news site Re/code, it was a simple snafu on Twitter s part, affecting less than one percent of Twitter users. Twitter was not hacked; the issue is not at your end.

Twitter just had a little hiccup, if you will. If you, too, received a worrisome email from Twitter around midnight Eastern time last night, just reset your password and you ll be A-OK.

In its brief time on the Internet, Twitter has suffered its privacy scares. There s already a rich history of noteworthy Twitter accounts including The Associated Press and The Guardian being hacked and then used to send out malicious, explicit or profane tweets on behalf of the hackers. Cybercriminals also like to target your Direct Message inbox, tricking you into clicking salacious links and then using your account information to spam your friends.

In this case, however, no bad guys can take responsibility. This was just a Twitter engineering problem. Choose a new password and tweet away.

Google Is Pretty Sure Your Data Is Secure

Speaking at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Friday, Google s Eric Schmidt said he is pretty sure your data is safe.

The Google executive chairman said the web giant has upgraded its encryption process in a project that was accelerated after former NSA contractor Edward Snowden revealed troves of classified information.

We are pretty sure the information that is inside of Google right now is safe from prying eyes, especially the government, Schmidt said. We think your data is very safe.

IBM Layoff Spares New York State

New York is the only state that did not experience any layoffs, said Alain Kaloyeros. He is the senior vice president and chief executive officer of Nanoscale Science and Engineering at the University at Albany s College. It actually witnesses an addition of more than 500 in Buffalo in the wake of the partnership with IBM. So, it is seen that the company is sparing the New York City from any significant Layoffs.

Workers are being laid-off in Iowa, Massachusetts, Arizona, Vermont, North Carolina, Missouri, Minnesota, and Oklahoma. According to Alliance@IBM, an employee advocacy group, the true nature of the job slashes is difficult to gauge; IBM has ceased counting the ages, numbers and titles of fired workforce in the packets dispersed to staffs.

Some state officials say they ve not been kept in the dark about details of the plan. Neither the multinational company in question, nor the state, would divulge precise news about the number of jobs lost this week. The organization also has rejected the chances of disclosing the number of employees they have in the state in total.

A Republican who embodies part of Dutchess County, Assemblyman Kieran Lalor, criticized the deficiency of clarity. Schools and counties often authorize the company to pay lesser property taxes in exchange for generating or holding local jobs, he said, but administrations then have no method of understanding whether the organization has kept its promises and whether the cuts in taxes actually work. It seems to be one of the reasons though, that New York State is being spared by IBM against any layoffs.

IBM has an extensive history in the city of New York. The organization was established in Endicott, and its commercial headquarters are in Armonk. But the organization s impression in lesser known cities across the country has gradually reduced as the company has gone international, regardless of a lot of money in local tax concessions.

Although the newest round of dismissals was anticipated, the week began with a statement by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in New York that the multinational organization had decided to produce fresh jobs, as well as sustain least employment levels in the state. He said that the commitment of the company is to persist the 3099+ good jobs in the Hudson Valley and nearby regions, which is in accordance with the commitment of providing at least 750+ jobs.

The company went to infinite lengths to keep facts about the layoffs under the wrap, the company s workers group said, and misplaced a key file from the bundle given to workers who were being sacked that would give an extent of the job cuts.

This step has been disparaged by many persons and Lee Conrad pointed out the scenario as just another attempt by the company to hide the number of job cuts. He was very categorical to mention that the organization wanted to reduce the number of employees to a great extent to damage certain aspects of the expectation.

This measure of the company, it seems, relates to the goals of achieving the earning of $20 per share. On top of job cuts, the company has dispensed money into buy-backs to make its stock more alluring to the stakeholders. Even as IBM cuts its overall jobs, the New York State is by far the most secured State since it was spared from the layoffs in comparison to other states.

Apple At Work On Full 4K Display Support in Mavericks

Apple may be making Mavericks a bit more 4K friendly.

In Apple’s OS X Mavericks beta 10.9.3, users are given the option to run the operating system in native 4K resolution on 4K/Ultra HD monitors attached to their Macs, 9to5Mac discovered on Friday. Apple is calling the 4K support "Retina" in Mavericks, the site claimed.

Although Macs currently support 4K monitors, they simply use the extra lines of resolution to display larger windows and interface elements. According to 9to5Mac, the new Retina feature correctly scales the operating system to the Ultra HD display, making everything sharper and more readable. The resolution appears to look the same as Retina displays running on a late-2013 MacBook Pro, said 9to5Mac.

That Apple is playing nicer with 4K displays is perhaps no surprise. The technology is quickly gaining ground in the monitor and television space, and more and more devices will need to support the technology.

HP 8 Launched As Budget Tablet, Pricing is Only $170 for New Slate

HP 8 Launched as Budget Tablet, Pricing is Only $170 for New SlateBack in the day, the term budget tablet applied to devices like the Amazon Kindle Fire and the Google Nexus 7 (2012). In those days, there were only two main kinds of tablet   the full-size iPad, and everything else, with everything else costing substantially less than the iPad line. With the Nexus 7 (2013), Kindle Fire HDX and other smaller Android tablets now having the specs to keep up with the iPad, these tablets are now considered midrange devices by many, even if they still cost substantially less. The real budget tablets of today are lower-end Android slates that typically aren t made by reputable manufacturers, but in HP s case, its HP 8 defines the term budget tablet in the best way possible   decent, if not overwhelming specs, rock-bottom pricing, and a well-known manufacturer behind the device.

The new HP 8 would appear to be an American version of the Compaq 8 that was launched in 2013 for customers from emerging markets. The device, which was launched yesterday, comes with a 7.85-inch, 1024 x 768 display, an Nvidia Tegra 3 quad-core processor, 1 GB RAM, and 16 GB expandable storage   in all, that s pretty competent, and in the same level as the Nexus 7 (2012), but far from what the Nexus 7 (2013) and Fire HDX have to offer. Other basic specifications include Android 4.2.2 Jelly Bean out of the box, a 2-megapixel rear camera, and a 0.3-megapixel front camera.

As for the HP 8’s pricing, it s dirt-cheap at $170, making it about $60 less costly than the Nexus 7 (2013) and the Kindle Fire HDX. The tablet is now available for sale on the HP website, and ships free of charge within the U.S.

Galaxy Note Pro 12.2 Deep-dive Review: Almost A Laptop Replacement

Samsung’s big Galaxy Note Pro 12.2 tablet offers a desktop or laptop computer experience - almost.

The new Note Pro has a crystal-clear 12.2-in. diagonal LCD display at 2560 x 1600 pixels, which provides 30% more screen real estate than on a

10-in. tablet. The viewing experience is complemented by a stunning sound system that makes playing videos truly immersive.

With a 9,500mAh battery, a Samsung Exynos 5 Octa Processor and 3GB of memory, I was able to get more than 13 hours of battery life with intensive use (including streaming much of the original 1990 BBC trilogy of House of Cards), impressive by any standard.

There are many other hardware plusses, including Samsung’s customary micro SD slot that lets you add up to 64GB of internal storage. An 8-megapixel rear camera comes with a super quick shutter speed (rated at zero by Samsung) and full HD video at 60fps; there’s also a 2-megapixel front camera.

My Wi-Fi-only review unit came in black with a faux leather back and a glass screen that, unfortunately, did little to reduce outdoor glare. A white version is also available, and Verizon Wireless now offers a 4G LTE version.

Samsung is pitching this tablet mainly as a productivity machine for writers, artists, executives and students who are mobile and need a way to create content as much as they consume it. So I decided to give it a try for 10 days - first, at Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Barcelona and afterward in my home office.

At 1.7 lb., the tablet felt heavy. It weighs more than the Microsoft Surface 2 (1.5 lb.) and the iPad Air (1 lb.) - and at 11.6 x 8 x 0.32 in., it’s noticeably larger as well. Still, it is much lighter than the 4.5 lb. MacBook Pro that I regularly use for work.

The limits of a virtual keyboard

To make the Note Pro truly an effective mobile productivity device at MWC, I needed to carry along review units of the Samsung Bluetooth keyboard ($60), the S-Mouse ($40) and the Book Cover case ($70). Unfortunately, even with these add-ons, there were problems.

Price: $750 (32GB); $850 (64GB) for Wi-Fi-only. 32GB 4G LTE model available at Verizon Wireless for $750 w/ two-year wireless agreement or $850 w/o contract.
Pros: Brilliant, large display; full virtual keyboard; superior voice and digital pen input; outstanding battery life; useful and innovative Magazine UX feature.
Cons: Inconsistent touch reactions; flimsy Book Cover makes it hard to prop up the tablet; priced too high for a market filled with alternatives.

I tried - in a cramped newsroom cubby - to prop up the Note Pro with the snap-on Book Cover; the cover wrapped around the back to work as a stand. Then I placed the Bluetooth keyboard and mouse in front. Unfortunately, the Book Cover was too flimsy to offer much stability, especially if I needed to touch the screen, so I quickly reverted to my laptop instead.

Typing on the separate physical Bluetooth keyboard with the Note Pro worked okay. However, when I didn’t have the time or space to set up the keyboard - for example, at news conferences and during meetings where a table wasn’t nearby - typing on the virtual keypad was practically impossible. The "keys" wouldn’t always respond quickly to my touches, and when I tried to hit the keys a bit more forcefully, they seemed to "stick," so that a string of letters would be produced even after I lifted my fingers away.

I found out later that recent surveys have shown that up to 40% of IT shops are considering replacing their employees' laptops with tablets. (Perhaps that's because many workers are willing to trade a heavier laptop for a lighter tablet; hopefully, they don't really need the ability to type quickly or often.) The touch on the virtual keyboard obviously takes some adjustment - I saw other fast typists at MWC making use of virtual keyboards on their tablets - but I never found the proper pressure and gave up because I had a quick alternative with my MacBook.

One ergonomic note on using a tablet regularly: To type on a tablet that sits flat, most people have to bend their head, neck and back over the screen. It's bad posture by any measure. Most of us know that using a laptop for long periods for years can worsen posture problems, but using a tablet all the time can be potentially worse - as my test of the Note Pro reminded me.

Fortunately, the Galaxy Note Pro has input options other than typing, such as Google Voice and Samsung's digital S Pen.

I tried using Google Voice for voice input. I must say, I have never used a more efficient tool to dictate emails and documents quickly; there wasn't even a training period involved. When did voice recognition get so good? Unfortunately, it's hard to dictate in a crowded newsroom.

The S Pen (available with recent Samsung smartphones and tablets) allows you to do a wide variety of tasks. For example, by pushing a button on the S Pen, you can quickly capture a screenshot or draw a line around an object to select it. Pressing the button while holding the pen near the screen brings up a little Air Command radial pop-up window to give you several choices for quick tasks like writing an action memo or finding contents anywhere quickly on the device, including all the video clips or emails written in the past day or the past month.

These two excellent input options made the virtual keyboard's shortcomings easier to bear and increased the appeal of the unit as an all-the-time device.

The Galaxy Note Pro also features the new ability to run four separate app windows at once on the screen. I was able to view a YouTube video in one of the four, while keeping Gmail open for new emails in another, with Google Maps and the Computerworld website open in the other two. When I pressed the home button to revert back to the home screen, small icons of each of the four previous apps still remained in their appropriate locations; touching one of the icons took me back to that app.

While some Android purists aren't fond of the Magazine UX customizable user interface to the Note Pro, Matt Hamblen found it beautiful and functional.

While some Android purists might be concerned that Samsung has added its Magazine UX customizable user interface to the Note Pro, I found the interface beautiful and functional.

For example, I created a screen that had several rectangular widgets showing general news, sports news, tech news, and so on. Each widget (like the tiles in Windows Phone) remained active and easily accessible. It's truly an example of Samsung improving on the Android experience.

Samsung also has beefed up productivity on the Note Pro with a number of

perks, including a new word processing, spreadsheet and presentation suite called Hancom Office Suite. I fiddled with many of the functions in Hancom Office and found them similar to what's possible with Microsoft Office, although many IT shops and workers will probably wish to stick with the more familiar Microsoft suite if a workaround can be arranged.

Other perks include a $25 Google Play store credit, a year of Gogo inflight Wi-Fi (which has a potential value of up to $700 and could justify the Note Pro's purchase price for frequent fliers), a one-year free subscription to Business Week and 12 weeks free of the New York Times. There's also six months free of Cisco WebEx, three months free of Sirius XM Internet radio and 50GB of Dropbox cloud storage free for two years.

All this doesn't come cheap: If you want the Wi-Fi-only versions, you need to be willing to shell out $750 for the 32GB model or $850 for the 64GB model. If you also purchase the keyboard, mouse and cover that I used at MWC, it can add up to $170 more. At that point, you might be asking yourself: Why didn't I get a Chromebook for $320?

(If you need connections outside of Wi-Fi, Verizon offers the 32GB model with 4G LTE for $750 plus a two-year wireless agreement or with no prepaid contract for $850 with its More Everything wireless plans.)

Samsung is known for offering many different models of the various devices it makes and already has a range of tablet screen sizes - it has now added a 12.2-in form factor. The Galaxy Note Pro 12.2 is powerful and capable, and could be valuable for many students and mobile workers if they can adjust to typing on a virtual screen or with a Bluetooth keyboard. If only it didn't come with such a high sales price.

Windows 8.1 Update 1 Spewed Online A Month Early by Microsoft

Early leaks of upcoming builds of Windows are common enough, but the latest leak of code purporting to be Windows 8.1 Update 1 comes from an unusual source Microsoft itself.

On Thursday, wily snoops discovered that the set of six updates that make up the forthcoming overhaul of Windows 8.1 can already be downloaded from Redmond's own servers, and some intrepid hackers even managed to get them via Windows Update.

This, despite the fact that the update has reportedly only just been released to manufacturing, and it wasn't expected to ship to customers before April, at the earliest.

The Windows Update method is tricky, as it involves tweaking a setting in the Registry. And while some online forum members report success using it, others say that Microsoft appears to have already blocked it, such that not all of the required updates appear in Windows Update any longer.

Fear not, though there are apparently direct download links for all of the updates, and while you can't find them by searching Microsoft's site, helpful hackers have posted them all for you online.

Separate packages are available for 32-bit x86, x86-64, and ARM versions of Windows yes, even the unloved Windows RT gets to share the Update 1

wealth so make sure you only download the ones for the architecture you need, and don’t try to mix and match.

Also, forum posters warn that it’s essential to install all of the updates in the correct order, or the process will likely fail.

It is at this juncture that we at Vulture Annex in San Francisco would like to caution readers that performing this kind of unsanctioned brain surgery on Windows PCs can very easily have all kinds of undesirable results. If you don’t feel 100 per cent confident that you know what you’re doing, you’re best advised to not try at all.

And if you do run into problems or even if you don’t don’t say The Reg told you to do it. In fact, here you go: Don’t do this. It’s a bad idea.

That said, if you absolutely can’t restrain yourself, you can find complete instructions and direct links to the update packages in the order in which they should be installed here. (And if for some reason those links no longer work, presumably there’s always BitTorrent once the cat is out of the bag on something like this, we find it seldom crawls back in.)

When asked to comment on the matter, a Microsoft spokesman said only, "We look forward to sharing details about the update soon."

Yahoo Scuttles Google and Facebook Log-ins, Buys Vizify

In CEO Marissa Mayer’s quest to challenge Google and Facebook, Yahoo confirmed Wednesday that it will no longer accept accounts from its younger rivals for popular offerings such as Flickr, while the Sunnyvale company acquired yet another startup to bolster its workforce.

Many websites let users verify their identity with Google or Facebook log-ins, allowing Web surfers to avoid multiple sign-ins to access material across different sites. While the practice allows ease of access, it also provides those companies valuable information about the users’ activities and preferences, which they use to target advertisements among other revenue-generating practices.

Yahoo, which has been passed by Google and Facebook in display advertisements and is struggling to find growth in an area it used to dominate, is seeking to ensure that it captures that information instead of its rivals when users access popular products such as its fantasy sports offering and photo-storage site Flickr.

"This new process, which now asks users to sign in with a Yahoo username, will allow us to offer the best personalized experience to everyone," a spokeswoman told Mercury News reporter Brandon Bailey on Wednesday.

Yahoo also said that it is seeking to establish "a single account and password for all Yahoo products, across devices," which seemed to indicate that Tumblr, the popular blogging site Yahoo purchased for nearly $1 billion in 2013, could eventually require users to establish a Yahoo account. A spokeswoman shot down that idea, however, saying Wednesday that Tumblr will remain independent.

While Tumblr was Yahoo’s most discussed acquisition of 2013, it was one of

just 26 purchases the company made last year, according to Yahoo’s annual report, a rate of one acquisition every two weeks as Mayer looked to startups for fresh talent. The company followed that path yet again Wednesday, with the purchase of Vizify, a Portland, Ore., startup that sought to unite their social data in a visually inviting platform.

No acquisition price was provided for the deal, and Vizify will shut down as the workers migrate to Yahoo.

Power Down: It s The Annual Day of Digital Detox

It must be a week for giving up stuff.

Lent began Wednesday, with Christians promising to refrain from such indulgences as chocolate and alcohol for 40 days.

And beginning at 6 p.m. Friday, organizers with the fifth annual National Day of Unplugging are asking you yes, because you re reading this on an electronic device to go off the grid for 24 hours.

Cellphones, tablets, laptops give em all up until 6 p.m. Saturday. No Twitter. No Facebook. No texting. Can t go cold turkey for 24 hours? That s OK. Every little bit of time offline helps, organizers say.

 It s become an international movement and a chance for individuals and families to pause and make a conscious choice to connect with the world around them, said Robin Kramer, executive director of Reboot, the non-profit behind the event. The NDU offers a welcome respite from the never-ending stream of digital information we are exposed to throughout the year.

Just exactly how many people will turn off is unknown, but we expect tens of thousands of people at a minimum to participate in their own way, said Tanya Schevitz, spokeswoman for the National Day of Unplugging. We are hearing from people all over the world that this is something that is resonating with them.

That would include folks in Fort Worth.

While workers didn t get started early enough to participate in this weekend s event, the city is looking to do its part in the future, said Monique Hill, interim superintendent of community services for the city of Fort Worth.

 We re very interested in doing it in the future, Hill said, explaining that they want to encourage families to go offline and come to city parks and enjoy the outdoors in a no cellphone area.

Hill said they are still looking at dates for the event.

Nationally, one of the most interesting events is in San Francisco, where a party is being held for more than 2,000 young people who will have to check in their cellphones at the door. Once inside, they can do such old school activities as writing on typewriters and playing board games, Schevitz said.

She said they have also reached out to those attending SXSW, the annual

festival in Austin that started Thursday and features music, film and all things interactive.

We know that the people at SXSW Interactive are among the most plugged in and likely tech-addicted people in the world and we encourage them to take time to put down their cell phones, stop their status updates to talk face to face to each other at least for a little while, Schevitz said in an email.

Those interested in signing a pledge can do so at nationaldayofunplugging.com. And yes, you can like it on Facebook.

San Francisco Bar Bans ’Glassholes’

The tech/town turmoil continues to grow here as at least one bar asks patrons to remove their Google Glass before entering.

Google Glass are wearable computers mounted on eyeglass frames.

Launched in 2013, they are both cool and creepy.

The glasses have became one of several focal points in the escalating tension between young, well-paid tech workers and those who feel their influx threatens to make San Francisco unaffordable to those not earning tech salaries.

On Feb. 21, a tech writer named Sarah Slocum had a pair of the high-tech specs stolen at a punk bar in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Patronsreported they were upset at being recorded during last call. Others noted that flaunting a $1,500 tech toy might make one a robbery target.

That incident has sparked a firestorm of controversy over the Google goggles, which gives users hands-free access to the Internet via voice commands.

The function that concerns people is the glasses’ ability to record photos, video and sound.

The Willows bar in San Francisco’s tech/hip SOMA district has posted a sign asking they not be worn inside.

"Our patrons have expressed concern with being recorded while enjoying themselves at the Willows," the sign reads, above an image of a pair of Google Glass glasses with a big red no symbol over them. "Kindly Remove Before Entering."

Google itself used the term "glasshole," in a do’s and don’ts memo to users posted on its site. One of the don’ts:

"Be creepy or rude (aka, a "Glasshole"). Respect others and if they have questions about Glass don’t get snappy. Be polite and explain what Glass does and remember, a quick demo can go a long way. In places where cell phone cameras aren’t allowed, the same rules will apply to Glass. If you’re asked to turn your phone off, turn Glass off as well."

San Francisco bar owner Kevin Harrington says it’s simply a question of

good behavior. His bar, The Last Call in the Castro, doesn’t ban Google Glass.

"I would base my policy on the reaction of my customers. And I honestly think the majority of them would feel uncomfortable" if someone were filming them without their permission, he said.

People come to bars to relax and socialize. While they certainly don’t have a total expectation of privacy -bars are after all public spaces - they might not want to be filmed.

"Some people may not be out (as gay), some people may be having an affair," Harrington said.

He expects "a lot of bars in San Francisco are probably going to start putting signs up about Google Glass," but thinks the whole thing will eventually sort itself out.

To Harrington, the broader issue is San Francisco’s changing demographics and how people are reacting to it.

"When gay people moved into the Castro in the 1970s people were complaining. Now it’s the tech crowd. The city’s changing, but it always changes," he said

Google Glass can take photos and record video, but the wearer must be looking straight at whatever they’re recording.

Author and blogger Robert Scoble has had a pair since April.

"People walk in the bathroom with their cellphone in their hand all the time, and that’s far more intrusive," he said. "With my Google Glass, I have to stand next to you and look at you. And then I have to either touch my glasses or say ’Google Glass, take a picture.’"

He thinks the expectation of privacy in bars went away years ago. "My brother owns a bar in Virginia and he says ’Man everybody takes pictures in the bar with smartphones!’" he said.

The real issue is that the glasses are new, they’re expensive (about $1,500 a pair) and still hard to get, Scoble said.

"When the price drops and people actually get to play with them, it won’t be such a big deal," he said. "Until then, we’re going to have this friction between haves and have-nots."

The topic’s definitely coming up around town. Computational linguist Raymond Flournoy was at a coffee bar in San Francisco on Tuesday where baristas were talking about Google Glass.

"One said that he’d actually told a customer that he wasn’t comfortable with him wearing the glasses while he served him."

New York author Gary Shteyngart imagined something similar in his book Super Sad Super True Story in 2011. In it, everyone wears a computer on a pendant that tells them everything about everyone they meet.

He tried out Google Glass last year, but it didn’t measure up to his imagination. "

"You can’t look at someone and have it use facial recognition software to know who they are, how much they’re worth and everything about them, just by blinking," he said. "So far, Google Glass isn’t as scary as I hoped it would be, for my own dystopian, purposes."

Google Docks: Odd Barge at New Home

Google’s mystery barge floated Thursday to its new home in the California delta after the Internet company was ordered to move it from San Francisco.

The odd-looking, four-story vessel made of recycled shipping containers departed from Treasure Island to comply with a Jan. 31 regulatory order concluding that Google Inc. didn’t have the proper permits to build it there.

Construction stopped on the project late last year.

Google says the barge will serve as an interactive technology center when it’s done. However, various theories have been floated about its purpose. Among the most popular have been that Google is building a party boat, roaming data center or aquatic store.

The vessel’s new home will be Stockton, a city about 80 miles east of San Francisco on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River delta. The Port of Stockton falls outside the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, the agency that forced the barge to leave Treasure Island.

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